

## SIR THOMAS BROWNE (1605-1682), DEBUNKER OF POPULAR SUPERSTITIONS

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One aspect of our day that the social historian can not fail to note is the popular passion for so-called "facts," bits of information, reliable or unreliable, related or unrelated. Witness the plethora of quiz programs, the adulation that for a time was given Charles Van Doren, the excitement over the "Sixty-Four Dollar Question." Witness also the multitudinous magazine articles which ask solemnly, "Does lightning strike twice in the same place? Are brown eyes stronger than blue? Can hair turn gray overnight?"

Who started this habit of inquiry, of zeal for quaint and curious bits of truth, of exposing the false notions of the populace? So far as I know, the first to raise such inquiries, at least to any great extent in the English language and for popular consumption, was the metaphysical doctor, Sir Thomas Browne (1605-1682), whose *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (*Common Errors*) looks into some of the favorite superstitions and pseudo-science of his day. He is worthy of our attention because of the nature of his material and the curious and at least occasional modernity of his approach.

"What is truth?" says the serious doctor and stays at length to make his own answer. Such an attitude is in contrast with that of most of his predecessors, who frequently are off on allusions to the "stone Asbeston," the peculiar ways of salamander or amphisbaena, or perhaps medicines to win women, such as "the lungs of a Vulture . . . the tongue of a Goose, the brayne of a Cat, and the last hair of a Wolves taile." (Lyly, I, 116) Moreover, Aristotle's opinion was still spoken of with bated breath as "*Ipse dixit*."

To be sure, the *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* is certainly not a compendium of reliable information. Yet the author's very earnestness induces the feeling that in his person a new prophet arises in the field of lapidary, botanical, and zoological lore. True, for a modern reader, the solemnity of his approach seems out of proportion to the triviality of some of his material. His dignified introduction is in the tone of one who would negate the law of gravity, or who would prove Copernicus a cheat, Darwin a dolt, and Einstein a

moron. By contrast, some of his statements have the tone of Barnum's yokel who exclaims, "There's no such animal!"

At any rate, the more or less scientific method of the author is refreshing. To begin with, he at least thinks his method is modern. It is a seriously inquiring manner, no Everlasting Yea nor Everlasting Nay, but rather an eternal "Warum?" Like the dying Cyrano, he flashes his brand against all "ancient sillinesses."

Furthermore, he apparently foresees and forestalls a storm of disagreement. For carping, uninformed critics, who "fallaciously or captiously refute us," merely "laying hold upon lapses," i.e., pouncing upon small details, he has no time to spare. But he will gladly take notice of those whose intention is not "to traduce or extenuate, but to explain and dilucidate, to add and ampliate." (Browne, I, 119)

Another modern note appears in the idea that really to discover and discern truth, one must make his mind a *tabula rasa*; "to purchas a clear and unwarantable body of truth, we must forget and part with much we know." (Browne, I, 115)

Furthermore, he is modern in that he does not wish to monopolize human knowledge, but he will leave certain aspects of his subject untouched. For example, in the analysis of the beginnings of error, he leaves some aspects to the moralist, some to the Thal mudist, some to the lawyer, and some simply "to God." One strikingly worded poser is assigned to the schoolmen (the hair-splitters), namely, "Whether the resistibility of Adam's reason did not equivalence the facility of Eve's seduction." (Browne, I, 119)

Like a modern scientist, he does not shun reality, nor does he deny the existence of evil and error. This error that he finds all about him he defines as "a false judgment of things, or an assent unto falsity."

Before plunging into his encyclopedic list of "vulgar errors," the author passes from his analysis of the first cause of error, namely, sin in Eden, to the second cause, the erroneous disposition of people. Adam not only sinned, but he left his heirs a proneness to wander from the truth. The second cause is sub-divided into Misapprehension, Fallacy or False Deduction, Credulity, Supinity, Adherence to Antiquity, Tradition, and Authority.

All these have concrete illustrations. For example, an instance of fallacious deduction is the literal interpretation of Pythagoras' command, "Abstain from beans." What he really means is "Do not

run for office," since magistrates were elected by beans as ballots in some parts of Greece. The "fallacy of the consequent," or assuming a cause and effect relation where none exists, appears in the Pharisees' denying the holiness of Jesus because he conversed with publicans and sinners. Credulity is aptly defined as "a believing at first ear what is delivered by others," and Supinity as "rather believing than going to see."

The "mortallest" enemy in the list is the resignation of our judgments to any author or age whatsoever. Remember, he says, that Aristotle himself questioned the past and did not regard himself as *ultimum verbum*. Times past were once times present. He implies that Aristotle and Plato were once, as Emerson was to say later, only "young men in libraries." Such slavish appeal to tradition turns the back on nature. Moreover, much ancient "knowledge" can be corrected by critical and collective reason and observation. An argument, such as Aristotle's "why man alone hath gray hairs," is obviated since horses, dogs, and foxes all have been *observed* to have gray hairs.

Thus, having cleared the ground, he persistently subjects most of the errors to two questions: Is the belief consonant with reason? And is it "correspondent with experiment?" The three "determinators of truth," he argues, are authority, sense, and reason. (Browne, I, 326) By authority, he usually means the testimony of eye-witnesses and experimenters who have arrived at the truth empirically.

For his method, see his dissertation on the elephant in the third book. There had been an "old gray-headed error" that the elephant "hath no joints" and that, being unable to lie down, it leans against a tree to sleep, "which the hunters observing do saw almost asunder." Thereupon the elephant falls down; and being down, he can rise no more. But, reasons the author, how can an elephant *walk* without joints? Even though moving serpents, worms, and leeches lack bones and "all extended articulations," they have "arthritical analogies." Hence the first conclusion: the belief is contrary to reason. Further, records testify to the elephant's performing actions performable only with joints. He cites "that memorable shew of Germanicus, wherein twelve elephants danced unto the sound of music, and after laid them down." (Browne, I, 311) Hence, secondly, the evidence of history contradicts the belief. Finally, experience is against it; for an elephant was exhibited in England

"not many years past," not only standing but kneeling and lying down. Thus does the formula—Reason, Authority, Experience—forecast our present devotion to Hypothesis, Experiment, Conviction.

Experience should perhaps have had a greater portion in Sir Thomas's humorless discussion of the badger and the common belief that "the badger hath the legs on one side shorter than on the other." Again authority, sense, and reason are arrayed against error. Among the "total set of animals," he urges, we observe in their legs "equality of length and parity of numeration." If we assign equality to the badger's legs, he suggests, such inequality would be more reasonable if "placed upon the thwart or diagonal movers"—in other words, the cross legs. This strange statement seems to say that a right fore leg and a left hind leg could be made to match—in which case the last state of the badger would probably be worse than the first. Such theorizing, it must be admitted, illustrates an incredible neglect of the laboratory method. Surely there were badgers that could have been caught and measured. According to Sir Edmund Gosse, Dr. Edward Browne, a son, on December 10, 1664, did dissect a badger. Since he was then living at his father's house in Norwich, probably the father assisted at the demonstration. (Gosse, p. 82)

Sir Thomas is not so theoretical about another observable animal, the frog. With the conviction of a real biologist, he has "included the spawn with water in a glass" and with his own eyes has beheld the evolution of the "porwiggle" or tadpole into the "perfect frog." He adds that the belief that a frog may be easily drowned is destroyed by experiment; for "fastning one about a span under water, it lived almost six days." (Browne, II, 18)

One of the most interesting chapters, Book III, Chapter xxvi, concerning observable animals is that "Of Sperma-Ceti and the Sperma-Ceti-Whale." *Spermaceti* was a mystery to philosophers. It was believed to be a *flos maris*, or a bituminous substance floating upon the water, or even the spawn of the whale. But a sperm whale was cast upon the English shore at Hunstanton, which Sir Thomas undoubtedly dissected. Though the whale had been dead "divers days" and was "under putrefaction," the anatomist records, "The Magazin of *Spermaceti* was found in the head, lying in folds or courses, in the bigness of goose eggs, encompassed with large flakie



substances, as large as a man's head, in the form of honey-combe, very white and full of oyl." (Browne, II, 86) The "insufferable fetour" prevented inquiry into the "strange composure of the head, and the hillock of flesh about it" as well as the content of bladder and stomach. Into this display of scientific curiosity intrudes the artless sentence, "And this (the Physiter) may conceive to have been the fish that swallowed Jonas."

In the field of popular fabulous animals Sir Thomas walks with more timid steps. Here he must argue from negation, for no table book can definitely record that *amphisbaena* does not have a head at each end and that a salamander can not be shaved to furnish a non-combustible wool. Besides, there was scripture. Had not the holy prophet Isaiah spoken of hatching cocatrice's eggs? And did not Job mention the Phoenix? Considerable space is devoted to the latter. This is a creature of fame and beauty, only one of which lives at a time until its life cycle is completed. Then it dies upon a perfumed pyre of its own making to rise from the flames in new splendor. The "unity" of the bird seems to disturb the author greatly, for the concept is not only "repugnant to philosophy but to the holy scripture." Did not Noah take two of all living things into the ark? And did not Jehovah expressly command the animals in Eden to increase and multiply? How then could a bird of such single blessedness obey that injunction? And would a just creator command even a bird to do something impossible? His final Q.E.D. has no flourishes. Since the concept hath "neither reason nor experience to confirm it, how far to rely on this tradition, we refer unto consideration." (Browne, II, 11-12)

Another type of error that annoyed Sir Thomas Browne was that propagated by pictures drawn or painted without regard for truth. Consider, for example, the picture of Cleopatra dying "with two asps under her arms or breasts or both." Here his reasoning, though lucid, indeed signifies little. Cleopatra's infinite variety is only a mummy; and whether she passed to immortality by one asp or two asps or no asp at all is not a matter to disturb the slumbers of any century. In the first place, he says, no one knows the actual manner of her death; it might even have been from poison secreted in a comb. Further, there were never any asps discovered in the place of her death. The two small pricks on her arm may have been made by her own teeth, as opening a way to pour in poison.

The length of the asps may be questioned (if any) and the place where they were applied. Herein appears an almost unbelievable disregard of all imaginative license for the sake of art.

In this section appears a rather enlightened view of scriptural interpretation in the attack on the picture of Jephthah portrayed in the act of sacrificing his only daughter. The "death," he asserts, may not have been natural, but "civil," not cessation of life, but a "separation unto the Lord." Both text and reason are called on for support. As to the text: She bewailed her virginity, not her life or death. (This means, of course, not that she bewailed a loss of virginity, but she bewailed that she did not lose it in marriage.) The Israelitish girls went yearly to talk with the daughter of Jephthah four days of the year. Even the rendering "lament" signifies to "talk or have conference with one." As to reason: God abhorred human sacrifice. The offering encroached not only on religion but on discretion, for there was possibility of legal evasion. The vow was concerned with "whatsoever shall come forth" and could reasonably refer only to what was *sacrificable*. Where there is possibility of doubt, the author chooses the interpretation least derogatory to the Bible. Perhaps Thomas Browne felt, as Thomas Paine did later, that some of the doctrines of scripture, if taken literally, are really derogatory to the Almighty. This attitude seems significant; for though Erasmus had said that parts of scripture may be interpreted as a "popular poem," not many were ready to admit any old gray-haired error in Biblical interpretation.

Thus the melange of mediaeval and modern goes on apace. At any moment the author seems likely to embark upon a learned disquisition on some such question as which comes first, chicken or egg. Let not his modern motive, however, be forgotten or despised. It is to furnish criticism, cathartic, and clarification for the intellect of the average man.

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